

## **James Kirby Martin, "Protest and Defiance in the Continental Ranks"**

*The following is a series of excerpts about class tensions in America during the Revolutionary War from a book by James Kirby Martin, an historian. According to Martin, how did the composition and treatment of the Continental Army reflect class tensions in larger society during the Revolutionary War? What might this suggest about the Revolution and what it symbolized to Americans of various classes?*

A sequence of events inconceivable to Americans raised on patriotic myths about the Revolution occurred in New Jersey during the spring of 1779. For months the officers of the Jersey brigade had been complaining loudly about everything from lack of decent food and clothing to pay arrearages and late payments in rapidly depreciating currency. They had petitioned their assembly earlier, but nothing had happened. They petitioned again in mid-April 1779, acting on the belief that the legislature "should be informed that our pay is now only minimal, not real, that four months pay of a private will not procure his wretched wife and children a single bushel of wheat. Using the most plain and unambiguous terms, they stressed that unless a speedy and ample remedy be provided, the total dissolution of your troops is inevitable." The Jersey assembly responded to this plea in its usual fashion--it forwarded the petition to the Continental Congress without comment...

The assembly's behavior only further angered the officers, and some of them decided to demonstrate their resolve...They again admonished the assembly about pay and supply issues. While they stated that they would prepare the regiment for the upcoming campaign, they themselves would resign as a group unless the legislators addressed their demands. Complaints had now turned into something more than gentlemanly protest. Protest was on the verge of becoming nothing less than open defiance of civil authority, and the Jersey officers were deadly serious. They had resorted to their threatened resignations to insure that the assembly would give serious attention to their demands--for a change.

When George Washington learned about the situation, he was appalled. "Nothing, which has happened in the course of the war, has given me so much pain," the commander in chief stated anxiously. It upset him that the officers seemingly had lost sight of the "principles" that governed the cause. What would happen, he asked rhetorically, "if their example should be followed and become general?" The result would be the ruin and "disgrace" of the rebel cause, all because these officers had "reasoned wrong about the means of obtaining a good end."

So developed a little known but highly revealing confrontation. Washington told Congress that he would have acted aggressively toward the recalcitrant officers, except that the causes of discontent are too great and too general and the ties that bind the officers to the service too feeble to force the issue...The assembly thus provided an immediate payment of £200 to each officer and \$40 each soldier. Accepting the

compromises settlement as better than nothing, the brigade moved out of their Jersey encampment...Seemingly, all now had returned to normal.

The confrontation between the New Jersey officers and the state assembly serves to illuminate some key points about protest and defiance in the Continental ranks during the years 1776-83. Most important here, it underscores the mounting anger felt by Washington's regulars as a result of their perceived (and no doubt very real) lack of material and psychological support from the society that had spawned the Continental army. It is common knowledge that Washington's regulars suffered from serious supply and pay shortages throughout the war. Increasingly, historians are coming to realize that officers and common soldiers alike received very little moral support from the general populace...

The army's command, as well as many delegates in Congress, wanted soldiers who could stand up against the enemy with more than notions of exalted virtue and moral superiority to upgird them. They called for able-bodied men who could and would endure for the long-term fight in a contest that all leaders knew could not be sustained by feelings of moral superiority and righteousness alone.

To assist in overcoming manpower shortages, Congress and the states enhanced financial promises made to potential enlistees. Besides guarantees about decent food and clothing, recruiters handed out bounty money and promises of free land at the war's end (normally only for long-term service). Despite these great financial incentives, there was no great rush to the Continental banner. For the remainder of the war, the army's command, Congress, and the states, struggled to maintain minimal numbers of Continental soldiers in the ranks.

In fact, all began to search diligently for new recruits. Instead of relying on propertied free-holders and tradesmen of the ideal soldier-citizen type, they broadened the definition of what constituted an able-bodied and effective recruit. For example, New Jersey in early 1777 started granting exemptions to all those who hired substitutes for long-term Continental service--and to masters who would enroll indentured servants and slaves. The following year Maryland permitted the virtual impressment of vagrants for nine months of regular service...

The vast majority of Continentals who fought with Washington after 1776 were representative of the very poorest and most repressed persons in Revolutionary society. A number of recent studies have verified that a large proportion of the Continentals...represented ne'er do wells, drifters, unemployed laborers, captured British soldiers, indentured servants, and slaves. Some of these regulars were in such desperate economic straits that states had to pass laws prohibiting creditors from pulling them from the ranks and having them thrown in jail for petty debts.

The most important point to be derived from this dramatic shift in the social composition of the Continental army is that few of these new common soldiers had enjoyed anything close to the economic prosperity or full political (or legal) liberty before the war. As a

group, they had something to gain from service. If they could survive the rigors of camp life, killing diseases that so often ravaged the armies of their times, and the carnage of skirmishes and full-scale battles, they could look forward to a better life for themselves at the end of the war...Recruiters conveyed a message of personal upward mobility through service...

To debate whether these new Continentals were motivated to enlist because of crass materialism or benevolent patriotism is to sidetrack the issue... We must understand that respectably established citizens after 1775 and 1776 preferred to let others perform the dirty work of regular, long-term service on their behalf... Their legislators promised bounties and many other incentives. Increasingly, as the war lengthened, the civilian population and its leaders did a less effective job of keeping their part of the agreement. One significant outcome of this obvious civilian ingratitude, if not utter disregard for contractual promises, was protest and defiance coming from Washington's beleaguered soldiers and officers.

Private Joseph Plumb Martin captured the feelings of his comrades when he reflected back on support for the army in 1780. He wrote: "We therefore kept upon our parade in groups, venting our spleen at our country and government, then at our officers, and then at ourselves for our imbecility in staying here and starving... for an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us, so they could enjoy themselves while we were keeping a cruelty from them." General John Paterson, who spoke out in March 1780, summarized the feelings of many officers when he said, "It really gives me great pain to think of our public affairs; where is the public spirit of the year 1775? Where are those flaming patriots who were ready to risk their lives, their fortunes, their all, for the public?" Such thoughts were not dissimilar from those of a "Jersey Soldier" who poured his sentiments into an editorial during May 1779 in support of those regimental officers who were trying to exact some form of financial justice from their state legislature. [He wrote,] "It must be truly mortifying to the virtuous soldier to observe many, at this day, displaying their cash, and sauntering in idleness and luxury," he went on, including "the gentry... [who] are among the foremost to despise our poverty and laugh at our distress...."

It must be remembered that middle and upper-class civilians considered Washington's new regulars to be representative of the vulgar herd in a society that still clung to deferential values. The assumption was that the most fit in terms of wealth and community social standing were to lead while the least fit were to follow, even when that means becoming little more than human cannon fodder...

As befit the deferential nature of their times as well as their concern for maintaining sharp distinctions in rank as a key to a disciplined fighting force, officers, many of whom were drawn from the better sort in society, expected nothing less that steady, if not blind obedience to their will from the rank and file. In their commitment to pursuing the goals of the Revolution, the officers were anything but social levelers. Indeed, many of them feared that the Revolution might get out of hand and lead to actual internal social upheaval, particularly if the vulgar herd gained too much influence and authority, whether in or out of the army.

